

Word memory and regular sound change

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Much recent work has argued that the processes of speech production and perception involve both abstract categories, and word specific episodic memories. In such models, the evolution of the representation of sounds and words would be heavily influenced by factors emerging from the iteration of a production/perception loop.

This talk presents data from four sound changes that have occurred over the history of New Zealand English, in order to investigate the predictions and consequences of such models for sound change. Data is drawn from the extensive Origins of New Zealand English (ONZE) databases, which span 130 years of sound change. I investigate the trajectory of these changes, with particular attention to the degree to which word-specificity is present in the data. Explanation of factors conditioning the changes is situated within the context of the production/perception loop.

Particular attention is paid to the role of word frequency in sound change. Word frequency is shown to have been important in shaping the trajectory of all four sound changes. The nature of these word frequency effects are surprising, and appear conflicting given the dominant discourse surrounding word frequency in the language variation and change literature. However I argue that they can be straightforwardly predicted by models of speech production and perception which include word-specific representations.